

**Abstract 647**

**TITLE:** Women Who have Sex with Women or Lesbians? The Dilemma of Community Identification and the Impact on HIV Prevention

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There has been continued discussion on the level of HIV risk present in women who have sex with women (WSW). WSW are presumed to be women who do not identify with the lesbian or bisexual identity or lifestyle, but engage in same gender sexual behavior. Many WSWs exhibit lifestyle behaviors that place them at high-risk for contracting HIV and STDs. The Women's Health Awareness and HIV Prevention Project of Howard Brown Health Center is designed to help women identify their own risk factors for contracting or transmitting HIV and other STDs. Howard Brown Health Center provides primary care medical services and HIV prevention services to the lesbian, gay and bisexual community in the Midwest. The project focuses on incarcerated women, former sex workers and recovering substances abusers and provides STD and HIV risk reduction through outreach, skill building groups, and prevention case management.

WSWs are not necessarily closeted women; rather, they may choose to straddle cultures, or maintain parallel sexual lives with women and men, or may refuse to accept sexual labels. The concept of WSWs, and the challenges encountered in reaching them with prevention education have forced new dialogues around issues of culture, power, group membership, and community boundaries. Additionally, the positioning of this project in a self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual organization demands new strategies to deliver culturally respectful and appropriate health materials. Effective strategies have emerged to engage WSWs and to deliver education and build risk reduction skills.

This presentation explores issues of culture and sexual identity in health promotional work with women. We present the dilemmas of targeted health promotional strategies, and the benefits of broadening educational messages. The implications of culture on identity politics for women, including the psychological and political implications of straddling communities will be discussed. We will specifically focus on the challenges of reaching hidden populations of women. Successful strategies in developing cultural competency with HIV prevention with WSW will be highlighted. Attendees will be encouraged to translate our experience to their own communities.

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